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Guest Columnist

America's heartbreaking decline in four reports

From the U.N. to The Economist, global reports show that the U.S. is falling behind on eliminating suffering and inequality.



President Joe Biden addresses the 77th session of the United Nations General Assembly at the U.N. headquarters in New York City on Sept. 21, 2022. [TIMOTHY A. CLARY/AFP | Getty Images North America]

Four global reports recently released by some of the world's leading mainstream international organizations paint a bleak picture of human development in the United States. These reports should alarm all Americans concerned about overcoming needless human suffering and creating a just society. We have an opportunity in this election year to support those candidates who offer clear programs to address these issues.

First, the United Nations Development Program released its new “[Human Development Index](#)” for 2021-22. The index is calculated by taking into account life expectancy, education and per capita income. The U.N. report then ranks countries based on a composite score. Based on these indicators, overall human development has declined globally for the last two years, with nine out of 10 countries reporting a weakening of those indicators in either 2021 or 2022. The acute drop began in 2020 with the onset of the pandemic. But the downward trajectory for the U.S. began before COVID. Between 2015 and 2021, the U.S. has dropped from 18th to 21st among developed nations in the index. This dismal outcome is a result of our declining life expectancy rates and deteriorating public education.

Second, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development measures inequality within countries and unequal access to wealth. Numerous reports now document how income inequality in the U.S. has dramatically risen over the past 30 years. According to OECD measurements, the U.S. has the highest levels of income inequality — the biggest wealth gap — among the G-7 nations. Our inequality ranking is now tied with that of Turkey and Bulgaria.

Third, the Economist Intelligence Unit rated the United States as a “flawed democracy” for the fifth consecutive year. The Economist publishing group started its global index in 2006. In 2020 the U.S. received its lowest score yet and ranked 25th out of the 167 countries evaluated. These countries were assessed on five areas: electoral process and pluralism, the functioning of government, political participation, democratic political culture and civil liberties. The report states, “public trust in the democratic process was dealt a blow by the refusal of Donald Trump and many of his supporters to accept the election result.” Furthermore, the U.S. score was negatively impacted by “extremely low levels of trust in institutions and political parties, deep dysfunction in the functioning of government, increasing threats to freedom of expression and a degree of societal polarization that makes consensus almost impossible to achieve.”

Fourth, the U.N.’s Office of Sustainable Development ranks countries according to their progress toward meeting the U.N.’s 17 sustainable development goals. The goals focus on equity and ecological balance. The U.S. has failed to adopt workable programs to meet the goals. As a result, the U.N. dropped the U.S. from a previous ranking of 32nd to 41st worldwide. This global ranking puts us between Cuba and Bulgaria, both considered “developing” countries.

Unfortunately, the U.S. is one of only six countries that has never voluntarily presented a review of its progress on the sustainability goals to the U.N.

The 17 goals to be achieved by 2030 include universal access to food security, clean water and sanitation, quality education and poverty alleviation. The goals are global and apply to all countries rich and poor. However, this is not a “one-size-fits-all” approach. Each nation is to choose its own national targets based on its unique history and circumstances.

Scholars note that the U.S. was not on track to meet a single sustainability goal before the pandemic. Racial and ethnic minorities in particular lacked access to essential health care, food security, and quality education. The U.S. has even struggled to provide basic public goods, such as safe sanitation and drinking water. Elizabeth Cousens, president of the United Nations Foundations, and Tony Pipa, of the Brookings Institute, write: “As of 2019, 6.6 million people (in the U.S.) remained without safely managed sanitation services — meaning they did not have safe sewage disposal options in the form of piped sewers, septic systems, pit latrines or composting toilets. That’s the population equal to the state of Indiana.”

The U.N.’s sustainability goals provide a framework for the U.S. to tackle the pressing difficulties exposed in these four reports. These goals prioritize programs to address multiple crisis inflicting our country and around the world, including: pandemics and health threats; poverty and malnutrition; climate change and sustainable development. The goals also reflect a human rights approach to economic development. This methodology focuses on the needs of the most vulnerable sectors of the population and pays attention to the destructive aspects of economic development. By becoming a full partner to achieve the goals, we become not only better global citizens, but would also be prioritizing the fundamental human rights and human needs of the American people.



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